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Collective mobilisation and transnational solidarity to combat Aids in China: local dynamics and visibility of groups sexual and social minorities

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Evelyne Micollier

The spread of Aids and fears raised by the risk of an epidemic are not only the driving force behind social change but also give pointers to the reasons for these changes, as many studies have shown today on a global scale. In China, as in other non-western countries, one of the significant social changes that we observe is the emergence and greater visibility of groups or activists to defend sexual and social minorities, a phenomenon which has created on a national scale a civil society, social organisations and movements with “Chinese characteristics”. For ten years, from the time that we first became aware of the risk of an Aids epidemic and its potential seriousness in Chinese society, some of the most committed anti-Aids activists have also been fierce defenders of the rights of homosexuals. This is reminiscent of the model for action implemented in the 1980s in the developed countries. Over the last few years, for example, these militants have worked to denounce the scandal of the “HIV-contaminated blood sellers” in the central provinces of China. The anti-Aids activism was a pointer to the presence in China of the potential growth of gay/lesbian movements in the large cities, especially Peking and the major towns in North-East China.

A localised HIV epidemic has specifically affected the homosexual community in Peking, an unusual feature in the context of China where the majority of those who are HIV-positive have been infected by contaminated blood (mainly by injecting drugs with contaminated needles, but also from tainted blood from the health services after a large-scale traffic involving the selling of blood). This said, the number of infections from sexual contact has seen an exponential increase in recent years: 10.9% of those

with HIV surveyed in 2002 contracted the virus by heterosexual contact, when the rate was as low as 5.5% in 1997 (UNAIDS, 2003:13).

Homosexuals make up the third group who are vulnerable to HIV-infection, after intravenous drug users and sex workers (men and women). However, the scale of the homosexual epidemic could be masked by the fact that 90% of homosexuals marry and have heterosexual relations with their spouses, at least for purposes of procreation (Pan, 1996; Zhou 1996, 2000).

Some fairly independent initiatives whose main aim is Aids prevention and which often operate through public health departments and academic institutions have successfully mobilised the male homosexual community in major Chinese cities: in Peking, where the number of practising homosexual men is estimated to be the highest in China¹ ; Shanghai, Canton; Xi'an in North-West China and Shenyang, Harbin and Dalian in Manchuria.

The associative groups formed in this way have a marginal existence. Some have been obliged to abandon their activity, or move back to being clandestine associations after short periods of formal existence. The leaders and coordinators of such associations can find it difficult to obtain work because of their commitment to the fight against Aids and their links with homosexual groups (*A Human Rights in China Report*, 1997).

Emergency phone lines manned by gay volunteers, family planning and public health experts are in operation today in thirteen Chinese cities (including those mentioned above): the aim is to approach homosexual men, give them information on STDs and Aids and any psychological support they might need (*Xinhua*, 2003).

Our hypothesis was that in the 1990s, the threat of Aids contributed to the emergence of homosexual groups and the fight to recognise their rights both in China and in other Asian countries. Today, a political struggle, led by the sexual and social minorities demanding their rights, and triggered and legitimised by the Aids epidemic crisis, is taking shape in the 'cultural landscape' of some Asian countries (Vitiello, 2002:6).

This article is divided into two parts: the first deals with the local dynamics

of Aids prevention, describing (1) committed activists wearing several “hats” (one official, one anti-Aids activist and finally one gay activist), (2) social organisations working alongside or in confrontation with the State, (3) informal groups or networks defending sexual and social minorities. These dynamics have an impact on the stigma associated with HIV and these minorities and could contribute in the long term to a degree of de-stigmatisation. In the second part of the article I look at transnational dynamics, identifying transnational actors and their role as “go-between” (Taiwanese, Hong Kongese who since 1999 have Chinese citizenship, Chinese from South-East and western Asia) as they may have more influence in interactions with militants and the Chinese populations, and thus in influencing local dynamics where collective mobilisation in the face of Aids is concerned. The intervention of “go-betweens” from the North (westerners of non-Chinese origin) can also be seen. The role of NICT (New Information and Communication Technologies), especially forums and networks developed at different levels through Internet -intra-regional and trans-regional in China, transnational in China and Asia, and also international- is described: the use of NICT and the creation of networks are characteristic of the process of economic and cultural globalisation at work today in the world. The formation of transnational solidarity groups is also a form of globalisation, “social” this time, more discreet and not yet very developed compared with the more comprehensive forms of economic globalisation.

Dialectic relations of local social dynamics

1) Activists with several hats in confrontation with the State

The “Action Project against Aids” was launched by Wan Yanhai, the most visible activist against Aids in China. Dr Wan was formerly a high-ranking civil servant in the field of health who was relieved of his duties because of his activism and his awareness of the problems encountered by ethnic and sexual minorities in Chinese societies. He contributed extensively to

acknowledgement of the vulnerability of these groups to HIV infection. In 2001, he worked to disclose the sale of contaminated blood scandal in the Chinese central provinces, especially Henanⁱⁱ. The association *Aizhi* (Knowledge of love), founded by Wan, pioneered Aids prevention, set up the first emergency Aids hot line in China, operational since 1992, and runs Aids discussion and information groups (www.aizhi.org). Although he had worked as a government health official, Wan preferred to pursue his activities in the context of an NGO rather than under the auspices of the government.

He is a committed worker in the fight against discrimination and is among those to have denounced the social vulnerability of those villagers who sold their blood and are now living with HIV. In 2002, while he was held by the Chinese government, he received an award (Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights) from the “Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network” and the association “Human Rights Watch” for his action for the protection of people living with HIV-Aids in China (HRW Documents on China, 2002).

This award was presented to his wife Su Zhao Sheng who went to Montreal for the occasion. Wan has come out openly as a homosexualⁱⁱⁱ and he is officially married to a woman with a degree of public visibility. He is also interested in the problem posed by international religious groups, in particular Christians committed to the fight against Aids: he has studied the impact of these groups in China in the context of globalisation, research funded by a Fulbright grant. Active in China, for example, are the Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Yung Moon, the Christian Coalition of the Reverend Pat Robinson, and the organisation “Focus on Family” based in Colorado. These groups are overtly homophobic and recommend abstinence as the most effective way of preventing the spread of Aids (Young, 2002:34).

Another prominent figure in activism against Aids is Gao Yaojie, a retired gynaecologist who was one of the foremost doctors to care for Aids patients in Henan province who had been infected with HIV, victims of the sale of contaminated blood. She contributed locally and collaborated with the international press in denouncing the blood scandal (Rosenthal, 2001).

As a result she was harassed and had her activities restricted by the local authorities during the period of official denial. Unlike Wan, she is today recognised as a model of civic responsibility and mutual aid and has become a heroic social activist after having been persecuted and threatened with detention for illegally practising medicine. In 2003 she received the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize (Prix Roman Magsaysay) for her work in the villages in Henan; a documentary shown on the very official television channel CCTV (China Central TV) was full of praise for her and showed her 'good actions' in the field. In contrast, Wan, who made his gay sexual orientation public, remains an underground activist in the eyes of Chinese officials probably because his anti-Aids actions were combined with the defence of homosexual rights: his website is still active intermittently and is occasionally put out of action.

It is interesting to note how the Chinese State has been able to use activists to its political advantage and unknown to them legitimise state actions with the intention, if not always successful, of making them into symbols acceptable to modern Chinese thinking: Gao's life and personality conform better to the moral order laid down by the post-Maoist regime and by tradition and are compatible with the activities of a "government charity" with "Chinese characteristics". An elderly woman who devotes herself to the care of poor sick people is following a traditional moral and social order even if their illness remains the subject of stigmatisation.

2) Social organisations working alongside or in opposition to the State^{iv}

At the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s too, many groups became involved experimentally in non-bureaucratic areas and looked for ways to reduce the gulf that separated the State from society.

Five categories of social organisations can be distinguished: clubs and salons with restricted membership, associations focussing on services (GONGO: Government-Organised Non-Government Organisations, a concept suggested by G. White et al., 1996), research centres, networks and forums (GONGO), and institutions that may be militant, informative, or

educational. One organisation may be classed under two or three headings because their boundaries are flexible. The GONGO, also called SONGO (State-Owned Governmental Organisations), act as mediators between national and international institutions. They practice a form of “government charity” which extends beyond the collection of funds for government departments and enables them to by-pass some of the rigidity inherent in the administrative structure: for example, they collaborate directly with the canton or municipal authorities while maintaining links with the highest placed official decision-makers. University staff and other members of the academic world have also created non-governmental groups that are working in the interests of the public and which carry out militant and educational “research-actions”. Institutions with a military, informative and educational vocation work in collaboration with the media and use all kinds of multimedia tools. Although their methods contrast with the more conflictual approaches adopted by NGOs in other countries, they can be very effective in achieving their goals.

Chinese networks link State employees and, to a certain extent, the work units (*danwei*) to which the members of these networks belong, and the popular informal organisations that are not registered as GONGOs. They are well placed to circulate information to a variety of organisations and to train young people. These networks play an important role in the areas of development which have the advantage of fairly easy access to foreign funding – for example for Aids prevention or environmental protection. They can be very effective in obtaining a consensus around the promotion of certain measures, but they do not represent the mass movements.

The degree of autonomy and social commitment in Chinese social organisations varies considerably. Militant groups stress that their main objective is to stimulate awareness of problems through information and education and not to bring pressure to bear on the government.

International donors support many associative groups of this kind – for example, those which contribute to Aids prevention under the auspices of health authorities, or those which are involved in social aid in cooperation with the administrations for Domestic affairs, Public Health and Education.

From my own observations in the field and the results of Raab's study (1997), the degree of operational emancipation depends on financial autonomy.

Young (2001) has analysed the changes that have happened in the way the SONGOs function in the first years of the 21st century, and believes that these organisations could become more independent actors in the future.

3) Groups for the defence of sexual and social minorities

Today, the status and condition of gays in China is in the process of changing but this has been well documented in the first two chapters of Zhou's book (1997:13-82) entitled "Delinquents, deviants and illnesses" and "Five friends in the closet".

We should recall here the legal position in relation to homosexual practices and how quickly it evolved in the 1990s. Until 1997, such practices were criminalised and "comrades" were considered as delinquents. After this date, homosexuality was no longer a crime. In April 2001, it was "de-pathologised" as a result of pressure from American psychiatric and psychological associations which referred to the WHO's International Classification of Diseases, also probably because Chinese society was displaying more tolerance towards homosexuals who were also becoming more visible. Until this date it had been listed in the "Chinese classification of mental disorders". Japan, Korea, Taiwan, People's Republic of China (including Hong Kong) are the four Asian countries that officially no longer consider homosexuality to be a psychiatric illness.

In western countries, where the Aids epidemic had largely become a homosexual epidemic, "the epidemic situation has deeply and permanently marked the social experience and the identity construction of homosexuality, both male and female..." (Broqua, et al. 2003:XIII).

Although this situation is generally different in the developing countries as it has not been a homosexual epidemic, the fight against Aids did stimulate the development of gay/lesbian movements or has at least favoured their

visibility in the major Chinese cities: in the 1990s, anti-Aids activism was a pointer to and a defender of “comrade” movements (gay/lesbian/queer). It was the driving force that encouraged separate groups to organise together, especially using virtual networks and also meeting places, discussion forums and information that were very real, such as specific bars and salons in Peking which were closed on a regular basis after police visits, but which then re-opened elsewhere in the capital.

To understand the local dynamics involved in defending the rights of homosexual groups, their visibility and “coming out”, it must first be remembered that there is a specific local image of homosexual practices which tend to be able to adapt, especially to the context of the Chinese family, which always represents the most stable institution in the Chinese world. I use the term “homosexual practices” rather than “gay”, the term that refers to the identity construction associated with the practices, because according to surveys on sexuality (Liu, 1992; Liu 1993; Pan 1995, 1996), the vast majority of homosexuals in China do not identify with a sexual minority. The reason for this could be associated above all with the preoccupation with being a father and husband in order to honour the filial duty owed to their parents and to ensure descendants for the ancestors; they therefore decide to get married and have children, marriage being above all a social institution to ensure biological and social reproduction. It is important to explain the conception and practice of homosexuality in the context of the Chinese family (Young 2002 34-35, Rofel 1999). Wan believes that at least 90% of gays, lesbians and bisexuals are married, and Zhou (1997:76) believes that 99% of the total population marry. According to Zhou (2001), the problem of sexual orientation, involving categorisation according to the gender of the object of the erotic desire did not arise in Chinese civilisation: the distinction between heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals did not exist. Sexual activity between people of the same sex in traditional China and depictions of it have today been documented (Hinsch, 1990; Vitiello, 2002; Sang, 2002: part I). The essential role of the family in the daily life of people of the Chinese culture makes marriage and

procreation compulsory, independent of sexual orientation.

Note that in the 1990s, four of the most successful Chinese films that had most international recognition were about male homosexuality in the traditional Chinese world (Chen Kaige 1993 "Farewell my concubine", Chinese People's Republic, and more recently: Tsai Ming-Liang 1995 "Vive l'amour", Taiwan; Zhang Yuan 1996 "East palace, West palace" (this title refers to a meeting place for homosexuals in Peking) which won an award at the festival of Pusan, South Korea) or in a transnational setting (Ang Lee 1993 "The wedding banquet", filmed outside the borders of the Chinese world). The life stories recounted by Zhou (1997), Rofel (1999) and in Ang Lee's film show that Chinese homosexuals today negotiate a level of social and family tolerance without challenging the model of the family as the foundation of social structure and values. Chinese gay/lesbian organisations adopt action strategies and claim their rights using methods that are less conflictual with regard to tradition and the post-socialist State than those of western movements. We do find here a constant factor in the way in which the emerging civil society deals with social problems in China: local organisations working for the recognition and easing of these problems negotiate with political or symbolic authorities, avoiding direct confrontation and conflict.

In China, the question of sexual identity is a less central preoccupation than in western organisations: for example, the acceptance of marriage and reproduction in negotiations with the parents, a way of reconciling filial love with choice in matters of erotic desire. Rofel (1999:460-464) clearly shows through discussions in homosexual bars in Peking that maintaining good relations with parents by marrying in order to have a son to assume the responsibility of providing descendants for the family or the lineage is an essential preoccupation which often comes up in debates⁴. In his film, Ang Lee shows a "happy ending" with the parents accepting their son's lover as another son, on the tacit condition that he gives them a son by marrying a woman. This "happy ending" is not pure fiction: Zhou (2001) reports examples of such negotiations in Hong Kong families.

Transnational dynamics

1) Transnational actors and globalised movement: the role of western militants or Chinese as “go-betweens” in the dynamics of local diasporas

Let me first explain the concept of “cultural citizenship” frequently used by specialists in Chinese studies in the area called “cultural studies”. Chinese intellectuals, whether in diasporas or in China itself reflect a lot today about the “indigenisation” (*bentuhua*) of Chinese studies and the emergence of a “Chinese cultural nationality” (cultural citizenship) that has developed in particular in some American universities in the context of these “cultural studies”. This concept indicates the imprecise boundaries between China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diasporas in South-East and Western Asia. Inspired by Ong’s definition (1999), Rofel (1999:457-458) uses this concept to show how nationality or belonging is not simply a political attribute but also a process through which culture becomes a category relevant to this affinity: it is a process of individual and collective construction, of finding one’s affinity, and normalisation techniques.

Transnational networks of Chinese culture or “Chinese cultural nationality” have a tendency to organise themselves around a shared culture that stretches beyond States and borders, to fight for the rights of sexual minorities who are also social minorities and for a specific gay identity which borrows simultaneously from the global model of “gay/lesbian” and “queer” cultures, yet distances itself from these so as to take into account specific Chinese characteristics. As highlighted by Rofel (1999: 457-458), “To be sure, what it means to be gay in 1990s China is nothing if not about crossing cultural and national borders...In post-socialist China, culture has replaced politics as the site on which citizenship is meaningfully defined, sought, and conferred or denied”. Sexuality is a critical area where normalisations of “cultural nationality” are reformulated.

The terminology that was agreed on by the Chinese gay world to refer to themselves is significant: in Chinese, the term chosen by the Hong Kong

militants was *tongzhi* (comrade), a reference to the equality of a society with no class, the key feature in communism; in the Chinese Republic, when homosexuality was still considered by health professionals, scientists and lawyers as a disease, it was the term *tongxing lian* (relations with the same sex) with the character *nu* (woman) or *nan* (man) in front to distinguish male and female homosexual relations which dominated the discourse: the most tolerant spoke of *tongxing ai* (love of the same sex) (for example, Zhang Beichuan, 1994). Today, *tongzhi* refers to all sexual minorities (gay/lesbian/queer/trans-gender) throughout China and in the diaspora. According to Chou's hypothesis (2000), the fact that the Hong Kong gays adopted the most "sacred" term in communist China as their identity marker shows their desire to "indigenise" sexual politics and claim a distinct cultural identity from a global gay identity.

Thus the emergence in Asian societies of gay sub-cultures which are global but which preserve and celebrate local characteristics is today documented (Vitiello 2002, Sullivan and Jackson eds. 2001).

Several homosexuals (gay and lesbian), originally from the United States and Great Britain, who are now Peking residents played an important role in the development of homosexual activism in China in the 1990s. For example, B., English, in his thirties, has been committed for several years to the fight against Aids in China working for a foreign development agency. He also participates actively, manning the emergency gay phone hotline in Peking: before going to China he had been an activist in England defending the gay and queer cause, and participating in street demonstrations. Another activist, a lesbian, a British national, was a pioneer in promoting gay/lesbian meetings in bars in Peking: she worked for an international development agency and publicly and very openly declared her lesbian identity.

2) Role of Internet and the game of hide and seek with the boundaries allowed by State politics and society

For example, the *pengyou bieku* site (Don't cry my friend) www.pybk.com

offers a national service for 'meetings and personal announcements' for the gay/lesbian population. The site operates in the context of national legal restrictions but could be closed down at any moment. Wan Yanhai's site (www.aizhi.org) is regularly closed then re-opened at the whim of national decisions relating to Wan's actions and activism. Generally, the survival of such sites, places for information, expression and encounters between groups which the authorities find difficult to deal with in the context of the management of public health problems (prevention and treatment for Aids and STDs), remains precarious subjected as they are to the whims of an ambiguous policy that swings between repression and tolerance towards groups defending sexual minorities: indeed, all anti-Aids activities and actions focussing on the recognition of their rights and a more effective organisation of these groups in order to achieve their objectives have to be carried out within an authorised framework. Briefly, these problems of society should not be posed in terms of human rights and their official management should not be openly criticised. The boundary between what is legal and illegal is sometimes tenuous and varies from one moment to another.

For this reason, a virtual archive based especially on subjects that are specifically sensitive for the Chinese State such as the SARS epidemic and homosexual sub-cultures in China is being compiled, the result of a joint project initiated by the Chinese Studies Institutes at the Universities of Leiden and Heidelberg (Digital Archive for Chinese Studies) (Gross and Lecher 2003).

Note too that some gay sites, of which there are about 300 in China, are regularly attacked by angry heterosexuals with e-mail insults or computer viruses (Floracruz, 2002).

It is thus possible to see a transnational solidarity between militants from territorial China and those from the Chinese diasporas who also incorporate the heritage of their host societies, not forgetting the contribution from militant western foreigners who are not of Chinese origin. As a result, some militants, whether of Chinese origin or not, assume a role

of inter-cultural or trans-cultural 'go-betweens' with their stories of social movements, emancipation, struggle to recognise the rights of homosexuals and sex workers. They have not forgotten that in China, silence about sexual and social minorities was compulsory with their very existence being denied in the time of Mao (1949-1979). One of several significant experiences, that of Wan Yanhai and his *Aizhi* association, a symbol of activism for the prevention of Aids and the defence of the rights of homosexuals, shows that it is still difficult to break the silence. However, and fortunately, the shock of the Aids epidemic has to some extent encouraged new forms of mobilisation.

Notes :

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i. 1% of the male population in Peking are apparently homosexual according to statistics from the public security bureau (police), a rate that is a little conservative, but acceptable, in the opinion of Li Yinhe (sociologist in the Sociology Dept, University of Peking who has carried out studies on homosexuality: 1998, 1992), and very conservative, according to other sociologists specialising in sexuality (Pan Suiming, 1995, 1996) and gay researcher-activists (Chou=Zhou Huashan, who suggests a rate of between 3 and 5%); in Shanghai, the rate is 0.5% according to official statistics.

ii. Sale of contaminated blood products to health structures organised by mafia bosses: this traffic has caused an explosion in the HIV epidemic in the central regions of China through infections via contaminated blood.

iii. Conversation with a researcher colleague: experience reported in Wan (2001).

iv. Revised text from Micollier, 2004: 49-50.

v. She devoted a section of her article to this: "Gay kinship": 460-464.

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